



Pro Muffler & Automotive Center moved into a new building in 2002.

PRO MUFFLER & AUTOMOTIVE CENTER

Father and Son Operate a Fine-Tuned Shop

By Jim Wilder
Undercar Digest Editor



The 14-bay shop services about 30 vehicles each day but still has a reputation as one of the cleanest shops in the area.

Muffler Digest, but it never happened – until now. Jamie Peal, who is Paul’s stepson and “right-hand man” at Pro Muffler & Automotive Center in Corpus Christi, Texas, gave *Undercar Digest* a call and made it happen.

The interview with Paul and Jamie revealed a unique relationship that has resulted in a high-tech general-repair shop providing custom exhaust work that many shops have discontinued.

Paul cut his teeth in the muffler business in 1973. Fresh out of high school and just starting college, he

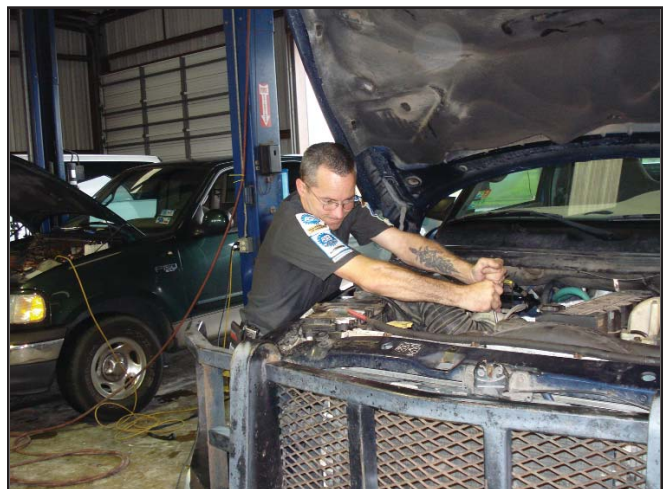
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Owner Paul Sulsh (left) prefers to stay in the shop area bending pipe, but he still occasionally visits with customers at the counter. Note all the ASE certificates that the shop’s technicians have earned.

Remember the 1972 song “The Cover of the Rolling Stone” sung by Dr. Hook and the Medicine Show? It was about a famous rock band that had everything it could wish for except it couldn’t get on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine.

Paul Sulsh has been in the automotive-repair and exhaust business since 1973 and had always wanted to be featured in *Undercar Digest* or its predecessor,



Jamie Peal has a reputation for his diagnostic skills but still has to use some muscle to make the repairs.

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Paul's wife, Georgia, handles the bookwork.

took a job at Oscar Byrd's A&B Muffler in Fort Worth.

"I took it as a temporary job and just loved it," he said. "I never looked back."

Paul calls Jamie the sharpest guy he's ever met as far as cars go and adds that the 34-year-old is a "sponge for knowledge."

"We're probably closer than most fathers and sons," Paul said.

Then the joking starts, with Paul noting that he calls Jamie a "car nerd" and that "just to make sure I wouldn't lose him, I married his mother."

In his early years Paul worked at a variety of shops

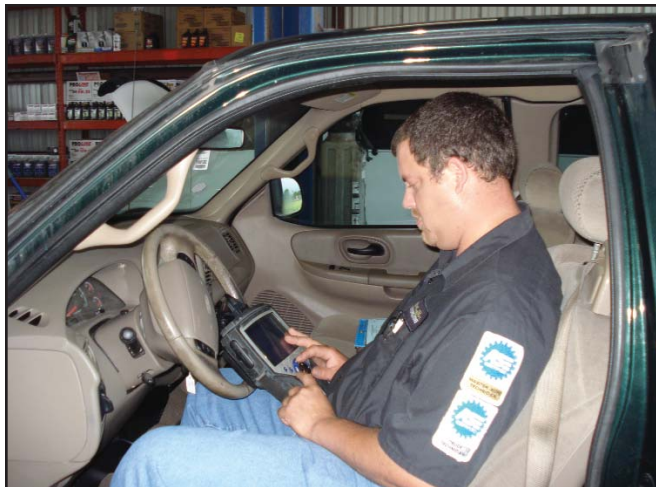
being left alone to work on cars. After a short time he resigned and took a job as a line technician at a local Dodge dealership doing what he liked doing best. But nothing stays the same, the two learned.

"Dad first opened the shop as a muffler and brake shop," Jamie said. "He was having a hard time keeping up. I was working for a local dealership and I was coming in during the evenings and weekends helping him keep up with the workload. After about three months I quit my job at the dealership because we got too busy too quick."

As in many family operations, Paul took to handling the counter with his wife, Georgia, doing the bookwork. Paul still continued the custom bending and exhaust work, with Jamie handling diagnosis and



Victor Sepeda does a pressure check.



Technician Paul Blunt is an ASE Master; Heavy-Duty Truck, Gasoline Engines; and an Undercar Specialist.

and even owned a shop for 10 years before opening Pro Muffler in a rented 5,000-square-foot warehouse building on Jan. 2, 1997. The husband-and-wife operation experienced rapid customer growth.

Meanwhile, early in his career Jamie found himself managing an Exxon service station with 14 employees reporting to him when he would have preferred

general repairs. The business grew to the extent that Pro Muffler & Automotive Center moved into a custom-designed 7,500-square-foot, 14-bay shop in 2002. As the business grew, technicians were hired and shop responsibilities changed. Paul, who always has had a somewhat matter-of-fact personality when dealing with customers, began to get more and more referral work for exhaust work and decided he needed to spend more time in the shop.

"I wanted to start having fun again," he said.

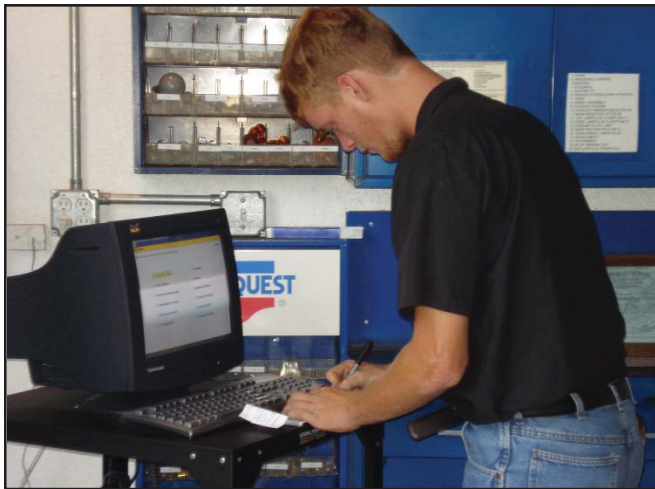
Jamie, who had sharpened his customer skills over the years, began to feel more comfortable dealing with people while still strengthening his diagnostic and electronics skills. He makes a point of explaining repairs to customers thoroughly, and with the older customers he usually sits down with them in the waiting room to assure them that he and the staff will make the proper repairs.

Four of the six technicians are ASE certified in various areas. Jamie is an ASE Master and also holds certifications including Master Truck, Air Conditioning, School Bus, Electrical and Electronic Truck

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Equipment, Undercar Specialist, Truck and Automotive Advanced, Collision Repair, Mechanical and Electrical, Engine Machinist, Assembly Specialist, Service Consultant and Alternate Fuels. His dad holds the Undercar Specialist certification, which includes brakes, steering and suspension, and exhaust. Paul Blunt is an ASE Master; Heavy-Duty Truck, Gasoline Engines; and an Undercar Specialist. Victor Sepeda holds certifications for Heating and Air-Conditioning and Engine Performance. Lube technician Justin Baker will start the certification process soon.

Today the shop repairs an average of 30 cars each day, not counting inspections, and most vehicles are in and out the same day. According to Jamie, most of the customers are blue-collar workers with multiple cars in their families and the typical vehicle is a 1995-



Justin Baker is the youngest employee and was hired as a lube technician.

05 model. About half are pickups and SUVs.

"If you come in to pick up your car and one of our guys doesn't wave and smile at you, something is wrong," Jamie said. "They know most of our customers by name, and they normally visit and tell them what they did to the car. The majority of the people tell us they feel very comfortable with us when they come in. We have a pretty impressive shop when you look at it. We have full coverage – you can get just about anything done, and it's extremely clean compared to other shops."

Jamie takes pride in the shop's expertise in diagnostics and electronics, and Paul has a reputation as one of the best mufflers in the area. As a result, area shops farm out electronic and custom exhaust work to them.

"We do a lot more electronics and diagnostics than anything else," Jamie said. "We've gotten a reputation in town that we can fix about anything that

comes in the door. We typically will find ourselves with the 'problem-child' vehicles that other shops haven't been able to figure out, and they will end up bringing them to us and we'll troubleshoot the problem for them. We do a lot of reflashing for other shops."

Jamie buys the bulk of his hard parts from the local CARQUEST store and participates in its TECH-NET training and merchandising programs. He also buys from the local car dealerships for specific parts. He said he always tries to use the best parts to prevent comebacks.

When Paul first opened the shop exhaust work accounted for about half the business. Now it's down to about 10%, but there usually is more than he can handle. The bulk is cat-back custom duals and emission control. Paul buys from Frank Supply in Schulenburg, Texas, and carries IMCO, MagnaFlow, Borla and FLO~PRO. He noted that performance-diesel work is increasing and the mandrel-bent bolt-on kits are becoming more popular. Catalytic-converter replacement remains a big part of Paul's duties, and as noted in other *Undercar Digest* articles theft of the units from customers' vehicles is increasing.

Jamie said staying current with diagnostic equipment is one reason for the shop's growth. The shop has Tech 2 with 2007 updates; MasterTech with '07 upgrades for Toyota, Honda, GM, Ford and Chrysler; Genesis with '07 upgrades for domestic and imports; Auto Enginuity with a laptop base; ATS on a tablet; and EASE software. Last year the shop spent about \$40,000 on equipment upgrades. This year Jamie and Paul plan to buy new wheel-balancing and tire-changing equipment to meet the demands of vehicles equipped with tire-pressure monitoring systems.

Unlike at some shops, fleet work is limited to a few small companies and to the trucks owned by cattle and horse ranches outside of the city. Jamie and Paul say they've never had to knock on doors to attract business. Their customers keep bringing it to them. **UD**

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